Border forces

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SMUGGLER NATION
How illicit trade made America
49 pp. Oxford University Press
£9.99 (US $12.95)
978 0 19 774 688 0

was, the smuggling ethos, illegal imports had made possible the relatively high standard of living in the colonies and the consumerist habits that underwrote the expectation of American prosperity; smuggling was an activity not merely of the "socially marginal", but of society's pillars. And Americans had grown used to smuggling and consuming smuggled goods because a lax state had declared certain kinds of trade illegal and then devoted insufficient resources to deterring illicit commerce. When Parliament tried to enforce its laws, it engaged as outbidded as that rate peculiar to habitual offenders suddenly taken to task for their transgressions.

These aspects of the "smuggling nation", established in the colonial and revolutionary period, remain essentially constant through much of Andreas's narrative: the government passes laws rendering some kind of trade or immigration either costly or illegal, but does not establish enforcement mechanisms sufficient to prevent considerable violation of those laws. As a result, illegal trade or migration becomes normal, creating the expectation that prohibited goods or labour will be available, despite the law. The will to enforce the law then erodes, as indeed does respect for the law. As the state expands in scope and diminishes in effect, it falls into further dispute, though never as completely as in 1776.

The state's embrace of smugglers exacerbates the problem. Sometimes administrations treat a blind eye to smugglers who are doing their dirty work for them, as when American entrepreneurs began bootlegging alcoholic beverages to the aboriginal inhabitants of North America. "Federal agents", Andreas wrote, "were almost routinely reporting that illicit alcohol was destroying the tribes, more rapidly than gunpowder or the advance of white yewmen with the plow". The law notwithstanding, the whisky trade was, one newspaper bluntly commented, "the cheapest way of extenuating them".

The imposition of tariffs led to customs collecting and inspecting for smugglers and cargo, the banning of unaudited immigration - first of the Chinese, then the Japanese, mainland, other Asians; the poor, ill, or illiterate: Eastern Europeans, Italians, and everyone else who might be clasped as non-white - required an ever-larger corps of officers devoted to the examination of papers and persons. Throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the US had stood apart from industrialised nations as an extraordinarily large economy with a state that remained relatively small, at least so far as its capacity to wage warfare or provide welfare benefits was concerned. But border security became an increasingly glaring exception to this rule, and an impediment to the growth of the American state's legal powers. Warren Harding and Herbert Hoover, who signed legislation increasing tariffs, and Calvin Coolidge, who supported laws to restrict immigration, dramatically increased the scale and scope of US government.

What had been almost true became truer with the prohibitions on alcohol and narcotics in the twentieth century. Harding, Coolidge and Hoover oversaw the swelling of federal authority to regulate Americans' self-medication. The money for investment in internalising liquor increased, as did the equipment and personnel. So did the administration for lawbreaking. Bill McCoy, whose apologia pro curriculo no distills Andreas's argument, I have precedent right out of American history for my run? running enterprises Americans, since the beginning of this nation, have always kicked rocks in the law they remade. The Stamp Act was law; wasn't it? Men who broke it are called "patriots" today . . . Lots of our best inventors conspired to break the Fugitive Slave Law, too . . .

The association between American lawbreaking and liberation assumed global dimensions when the manufacturers of bootleg craft for run-runners, Andrew Jackson Higgins, who designed a shallow-draft boat that could latch up onto shore, won contracts for the US military, which used Higgins boats to run up onto shores in North Africa and Western Europe. The drug war catapulted the ban on booze and intensified in the last decades of the Cold War. Richard Nixon merged various interception forces into the Drug Enforcement Agency. George H. W. Bush's administration stage-managed a crack cocaine buy across the street from the White House to help justify maintaining military resources after the end of the Cold War - they were required for narcotic prohibition. "Drug control even provided the official rationale for the military invasion of Panama and the indictment of Former Panamanian strong man Noriega (of Panama) on drug-trafficking charges, no doubt the most expensive drug bust in history", Andreas writes.

In the current argument for border security, advocates of tighter control cite the war on terror and Illicit Mexican Immigration. Andreas notes that historically, law enforcement at the border, like building walls, literal or metaphoric, has proved less politically palatable than internal security, like enforcement of requirements for checking identification at the time of employment. Americans have preferred their guardians to face outward, at the dangerous world. Recently, US citizens have learned their security services secretly look inwards simultaneously, as in all manner of supposedly personal communications. This level of internal surveillance, now that it is known, may alter the traditional balance between policing at the border and relative laxity within them that Peter Andreas calls "our smuggling story".